



# **RURAL WOMEN IN RURAL–URBAN MIGRATION: A SYSTEMATIC INTEGRATIVE REVIEW OF THEMATIC PATTERNS AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS**

**Judith Cherechukwu Benjamin<sup>1,\*</sup> Salihu Hammed Ph.D<sup>1</sup>, Paul Taye Ibiniyi<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Politics and Governance, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Communication and Language Arts, University of Ibadan, Oyo state, Nigeria.

## **ABSTRACT**

*Rural women constitute an increasingly visible segment of internal migration flows, yet their experiences are often subsumed within broader analyses that fail to capture their specific realities. This systematic integrative review examines empirical research on rural women in rural–urban migration contexts. Guided by PRISMA guidelines and utilizing Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) critical appraisal tools, two databases (Web of Science and Google Scholar) and six rural and migration journals were searched. Inclusion criteria encompassed English-language, peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2005 and 2025, focusing explicitly on rural women within rural–urban migration. 23 studies were included and synthesized using an integrative approach combining thematic analysis and conceptual mapping. The synthesis identified six dominant thematic areas: livelihoods and economic strategies; gender relations and household dynamics; empowerment and agency; structural constraints and institutional inequalities; identity and gendered subjectivities; and vulnerability and social costs. In parallel, six key conceptualizations emerged: economic actors, dependents or tied movers, constrained or vulnerable subjects, empowered agents, relational actors, and identity negotiators. The findings indicate that, while the field is analytically rich, it remains unevenly structured, with strong emphasis on economic and household dimensions and limited engagement with identity and integrative perspectives. This review underscores the need for more holistic, theoretically coherent, and relational approaches that better capture the complexity of rural women's migration experiences.*

**KEYWORDS:** Rural–urban, Migration, Women, Literature review, Conceptualization, Gender, Livelihoods, Empowerment

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Migration remains a central feature of socio-economic transformation, particularly in developing regions where rural–urban migration continues to shape patterns of labour mobility, urbanization, and livelihood restructuring (Choithani et al., 2021; Shilpi & Selod, 2021). Migration literature consistently shows that migration is not only a response to income differentials, but also to changing household strategies, land pressures, educational aspirations, and gendered constraints that differ sharply between rural and urban spaces (de Haas, 2010; Démurger et al., 2023; Omolola Olárindé et al., 2023; Tacoli, 2002; Tacoli & Richard Mabala, 2006). At the level of internal migration, rural women constitute an increasingly visible segment of mobility flows; however, their experiences are often subsumed within broader analyses that do not sufficiently distinguish the specific realities of rural women. This is significant because rural women migrate from positions shaped by intersecting disadvantages and constraints, including limited livelihood opportunities, unequal access to productive resources, and socially regulated mobility (Anastasiadou et al., 2024; Camlin et al., 2014). As a result, their migration cannot be adequately understood through generic migration frameworks alone; rather, it requires a more context-specific focus that captures the unique experiences of rural women within rural–urban migration contexts.

Beyond the lack of a cross-contextual synthesis of empirical studies on rural women in rural–urban migration—which underscores the need for this study—the motivation extends to a set of deeper analytical concerns emerging from the literature. A preliminary engagement with existing scholarship on rural–urban migration suggests that some of the historical characteristics that have long shaped migration research may persist, particularly within the rural-urban migratory pattern of migration studies. As earlier studies have noted, migration scholarship has often been marked by a male bias, a tendency to treat women as dependents, and a gender-blind approach that overlooks power relations and gendered processes (Fresnoza-Flot, 2022; Kofman et al., 2005; Kofman & Raghuram, 2015; Lutz, 2010). Although scholarly efforts over time have sought to address these limitations (Fresnoza-Flot, 2022), they still help explain the continued scarcity of research explicitly centred on rural women within rural–urban migration, as well as their marginal positioning within broader migration analyses. Importantly, even with the preliminary review narrowed to studies focusing specifically on rural women within rural–urban migration, potential patterns of thematic imbalance, conceptual inconsistency, and limited integration across key dimensions of women's migration remain evident (Anastasiadou et al., 2024). However, as these observations are derived from a preliminary and unsystematic engagement with the literature, they are inherently indicative rather than conclusive. To move beyond



these initial impressions and establish a more systematic understanding of the state of the field, a systematic article selection approach for review becomes necessary.

In response to these concerns, this study advances a set of objectives designed to examine the observed patterns, with each objective grounded in specific limitations identified within the literature, as outlined below. Existing research on rural–urban migration has generated substantial insights into specific aspects of women’s migration, particularly in relation household dynamics (Singh, 2019), livelihoods (Tanle et al., 2020; C. Zhang et al., 2013), and labour participation (de Brauw et al., 2021; Gaetano, 2015). However, this body of work is largely organized around discrete thematic concerns, with limited attention to how research attention is distributed across the field as a whole. This lack of a systematic overview makes it difficult to determine which aspects of rural women’s migration have been prioritized and which remain underexplored, thereby limiting a comprehensive understanding of the field.

**Objective 1:** It is against this backdrop that this study goes beyond merely synthesizing empirical findings to systematically examine how research attention is distributed across the literature. Accordingly, the first objective of the study is to identify the dominant thematic areas through which rural women’s rural–urban migration has been examined.

While a growing body of literature addresses women’s migration, studies frequently frame rural women through varying and often implicit conceptual lenses, most commonly as economic actors, vulnerable subjects or household contributors. (Fleury, 2016; Lutz, 2010; Yazdankhoo et al., 2025). These recurring yet limited conceptualizations are not incidental; rather, they reflect the dominant areas of focus within migration scholarship. In particular, much of the literature has concentrated on the determinants of migration—especially push and pull factors—and on gender relations, shaped both by the historical scarcity of women-focused studies and by the broader discourse on the feminization of migration.

However, the tendency to repeatedly conceptualize rural women through these dominant lenses provides only a partial understanding, leaving significant gaps in relation to other potentially important but less explored conceptualizations. This limitation becomes more pronounced when considering that many studies that include women do not focus exclusively on internal migration with specific attention to rural–urban patterns, but also examine other forms such as international migration or alternative migration trajectories, including urban–urban and rural–rural movements. As a result, the conceptualization of rural women within rural–urban migration remains insufficiently developed and fragmented. This lack of conceptual clarity constrains a deeper understanding of how rural women are positioned within migration scholarship and limits the development of more analytically coherent interpretations. A cross-contextual synthesis of this kind is therefore necessary to provide a clearer, more precise, and holistic understanding of how rural women are positioned within this specific migration context.

**Objective 2:** In light of this, this study aims to examine how rural women are conceptualised across empirical studies on rural–urban migration.

Guided by the objectives outlined above, the study is structured around the following research questions: (1) What are the dominant thematic areas through which rural women’s rural–urban migration has been examined in the literature? (2) How are rural women conceptualised across empirical studies on rural–urban migration?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a systematic integrative review design to examine how rural women’s rural–urban migration has been studied and conceptualized across empirical research. The integrative review approach, as outlined by Whitemore & Knafl (2005), is particularly suited to synthesizing evidence from studies with diverse methodological designs, while enabling both thematic and conceptual analysis. To ensure transparency and replicability in study identification and selection, the review process was guided by PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). While PRISMA structured the search, screening, and selection procedures, the integrative design informed the analytical and interpretive stages of the review.

### 2.1. Eligibility criteria

The study is deliberately bounded in scope, focusing specifically on rural women and their experiences within the context of rural–urban migration. This clearly defined focus informs the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles were included based on: (1) focus on rural–urban migration as the primary context; (2) explicit examination of rural women; (3) empirical design (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods); (4) insight into experiences, roles, or representations of rural women; (5) publication in peer-reviewed sources; (6) full text in English; (7) publication between 2005 and 2025. Exclusion criteria included international or urban–urban migration focus, exclusive focus on male migration, non-empirical articles, tangential mention of women, lack of rural dimension, and inaccessible full text.



## 2.2 Search Strategy

An initial search using combinations of gender-specific keywords ('women,' 'female') and 'rural–urban migration' across Google Scholar, Web of Science, and 6 targeted rural and migration studies journals yielded relatively limited results, raising concerns about potential omission of relevant studies given the already limited body of scholarship explicitly centred on rural women. In response, a broader search strategy was adopted using the inclusive term 'rural–urban migration' alone across all databases and journals. This approach maximized coverage and reduced the risk of excluding studies where women are discussed but not identified in titles or keywords. Gender-specific terms were subsequently applied during screening rather than in the search string. A temporal filter (2005–2025) was applied to ensure coverage of relevant and updated studies. This period aligns with the consistent growth in gender and migration scholarship as reflected in Sheikh et al. (2025) bibliometric analyses. While this broader strategy generated a larger pool of studies requiring more extensive screening, it was considered necessary for comprehensive and inclusive representation of the literature. Database-specific filters were adjusted in accordance with the study's eligibility criteria to ensure relevance and consistency across sources. **Table 1** illustrates how this search strategy was operationalized across databases, including the application of database-specific filters to maximize coverage while maintaining relevance.

### Database search procedure

In recognition of the varying interfaces of the databases and journals used for the literature search, **Table 1** presents a summary of the search procedures applied across each source. This includes the search terms used, database-specific features, filters applied in alignment with the study's eligibility criteria, and the number of records retrieved. This is provided to ensure transparency and replicability.

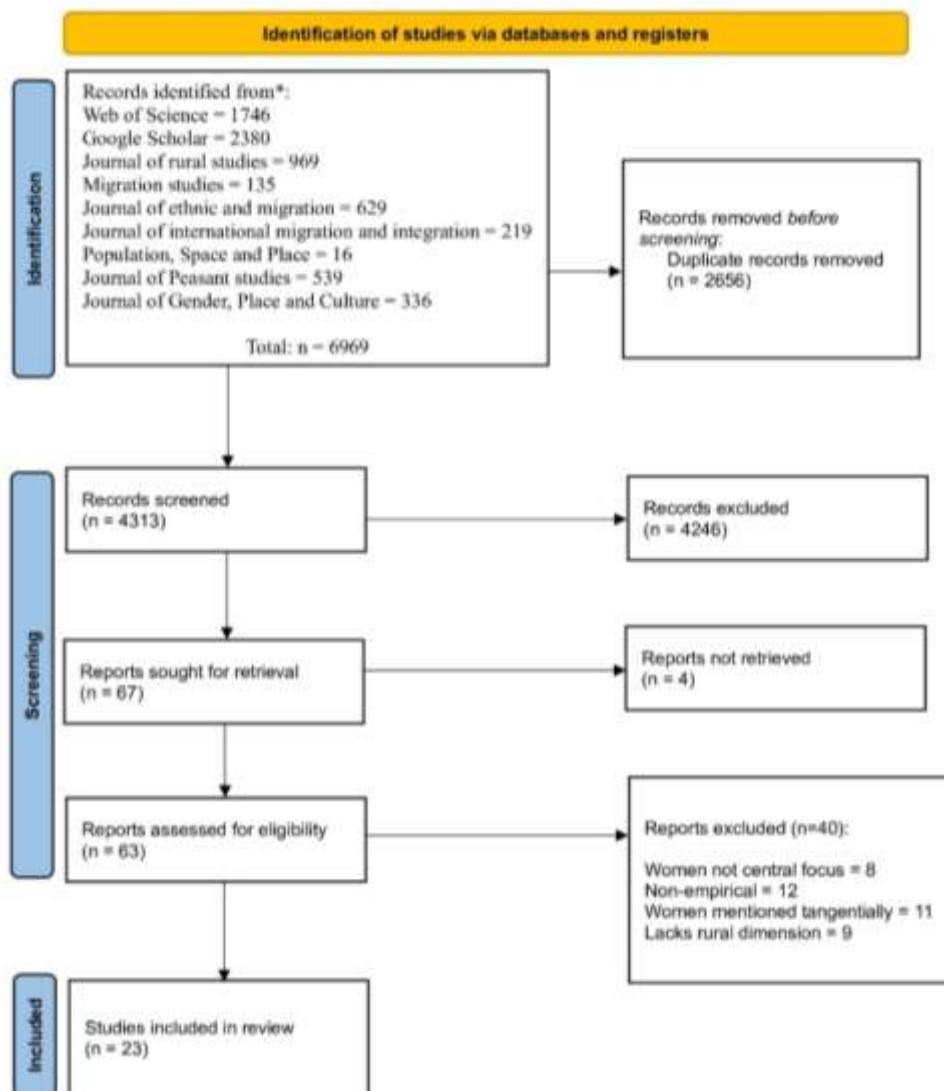
**Table 1**  
**Search Strategy and Results.**

| Database/Journal                                   | Search Interface/Feature Used | Search Term                                                                    | Filters Applied (Aligned with Eligibility Criteria)                  | Total Records Retrieved |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Google Scholar                                     | Advanced search               | "rural–urban migration"                                                        | Exact phrase: "rural–urban migration"; Title only; Year: 2005–2025   | 2,380                   |
| Web of Science                                     | Advanced search               | "rural–urban migration" (inputted in the Topic field)                          | Year: 2005–2025; Document type: Research articles; Language: English | 1746                    |
| Journal of Rural Studies                           | Advanced search               | "rural–urban migration"                                                        | Year: 2005–2025; Research articles                                   | 969                     |
| Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies            | Basic search                  | "rural–urban migration"                                                        | Year: 2005–2025; Research articles                                   | 629                     |
| Migration Studies                                  | Basic search                  | "rural–urban migration"                                                        | Year: Jan 2005–Dec 2025; Research articles                           | 135                     |
| Journal of International Migration and Integration | Advanced search               | "rural–urban migration" (applied to the Keywords field only)                   | Year: 2005–2025; Research articles; English language                 | 219                     |
| Population, Space and Place                        | Advanced search               | "rural–urban migration" (applied to Title, Abstract, and Keywords fields only) | Year: 2005–2025                                                      | 16                      |
| Gender, Place and Culture                          | Basic search                  | "rural-urban migration"                                                        | Year: 2005–2025; Research articles                                   | 336                     |
| Journal of Peasant Studies                         | Basic search                  | "rural-urban migration"                                                        | Year: 2005–2025; Research articles                                   | 539                     |



### 2.3. Screening

The screening process followed PRISMA guidelines (**Fig. 1**). The first stage involved identifying and removing duplicate records. The second stage involved screening the titles and abstracts of the retrieved studies to assess their relevance based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. In cases where eligibility could not be clearly determined from the title and abstract—an occurrence that was rare given the specificity of the inclusion criteria—the full text was consulted for further assessment. The final stage involved full-text screening of the remaining articles to determine their suitability for inclusion in the review, with excluded studies documented along with reasons for exclusion.



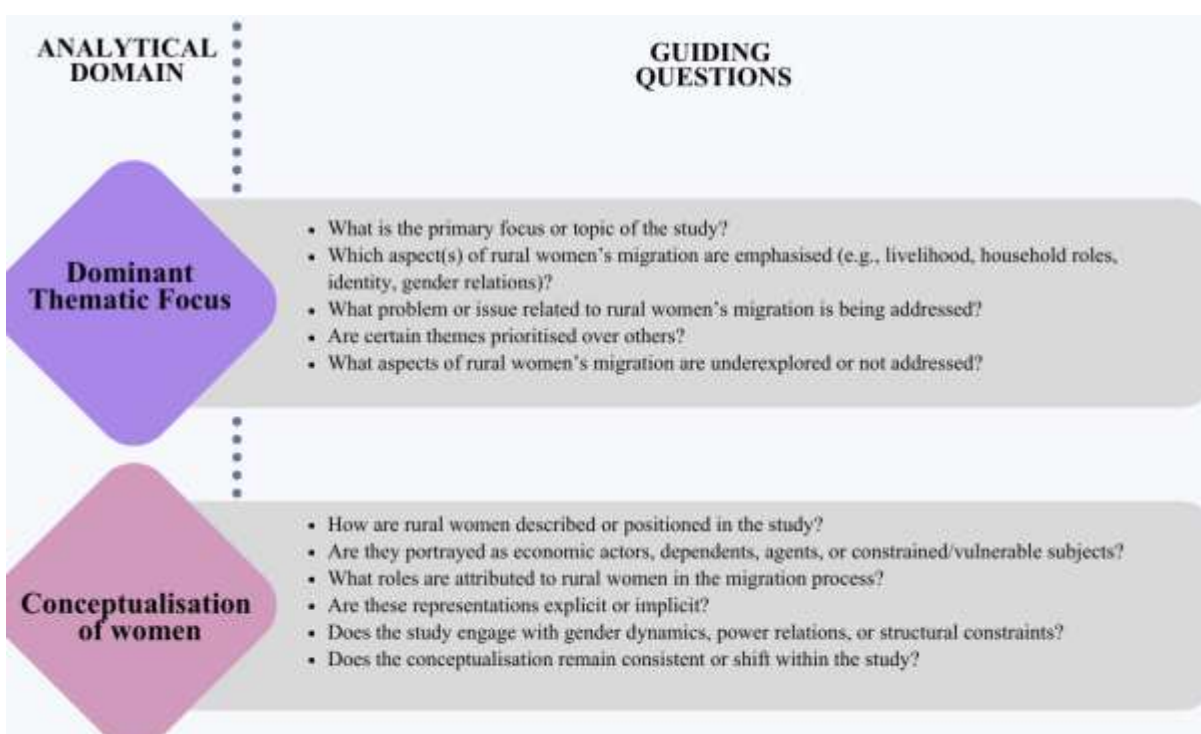
**Fig. 1. PRISMA Diagram of review process (Page et al., 2021)**

### 2.4. Data Analysis and Synthesis

Data analysis followed a structured three-stage integrative analytical process designed to clearly distinguish between thematic focus and conceptualization. First, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify what aspects of rural women's migration are examined across the literature. Each study was systematically reviewed to determine its primary analytical focus, and recurring patterns were inductively grouped into dominant thematic areas such as livelihoods, gender relations, and empowerment. These themes represent the substantive domains of inquiry within the field. Second, a conceptual analysis was undertaken to examine how rural women are represented within these studies. Independently of thematic focus, each study was analyzed to identify whether women were framed, for example, as



economic actors, vulnerable subjects, or empowered agents. These conceptualizations capture the underlying analytical positioning of rural women within migration research. Third, an integrative synthesis was conducted to examine how thematic areas and conceptualizations intersect, reinforce, or diverge across studies, enabling the identification of broader patterns, including areas of concentration, fragmentation, and analytical imbalance within the literature. To support systematic comparison, a data extraction matrix was developed to organize key study characteristics, including study design, thematic focus, and conceptualization of women. The analysis was iterative, involving movement between individual studies and the overall dataset to refine categories and ensure consistency. Throughout this process, both authors independently extracted data from a subset of studies and compared their findings in order to reduce bias, resolving discrepancies through discussion and consensus to enhance analytical rigour. Importantly, thematic areas and conceptualizations are treated as analytically distinct but interrelated dimensions: themes capture what aspects of migration are examined, while conceptualizations capture how rural women are represented within those analyses.



**Fig. 2. Analytical guide for the examination of included studies**

### 3. FINDINGS

**Table 2** provides an overview of the 23 studies, including author(s), year of publication, quality ratings, country, study design, dominant thematic area(s), conceptualization of women, migration dimensions covered, treatment of dimensions, and key findings pertaining to rural women's experiences within rural–urban migration contexts. The integrative synthesis revealed six dominant thematic areas, organized from immediate economic and household dynamics to broader structural and identity-related influences. These themes operate simultaneously and interdependently in rural women's lived migration experiences.

Studies were published between 2005 and 2025 and conducted across 12 countries: China/Hong Kong (n=9/n=1), Ethiopia (n=2), Bangladesh (n=1), Vietnam (n=1), India (n=1), Indonesia and Thailand (n=1), Nigeria (n=1), Ghana (n=1), Kenya (n=2), Mozambique (n=1), and Pakistan (n=2).

The final synthesis comprised six themes addressing the first research question: (1) Livelihoods and economic strategies; (2) Gender relations and household dynamics; (3) Empowerment and agency; (4) Structural constraints and institutional inequalities; (5) Identity, social norms, and gendered subjectivities; and (6) Vulnerability, exploitation, and social costs. Additionally, the synthesis revealed six conceptualizations addressing the second research question: (1) Economic actors and contributors; (2) Dependents or tied movers; (3) Constrained or vulnerable subjects; (4) Empowered agents; (5) Relational or household-embedded actors; and (6) Identity negotiators.

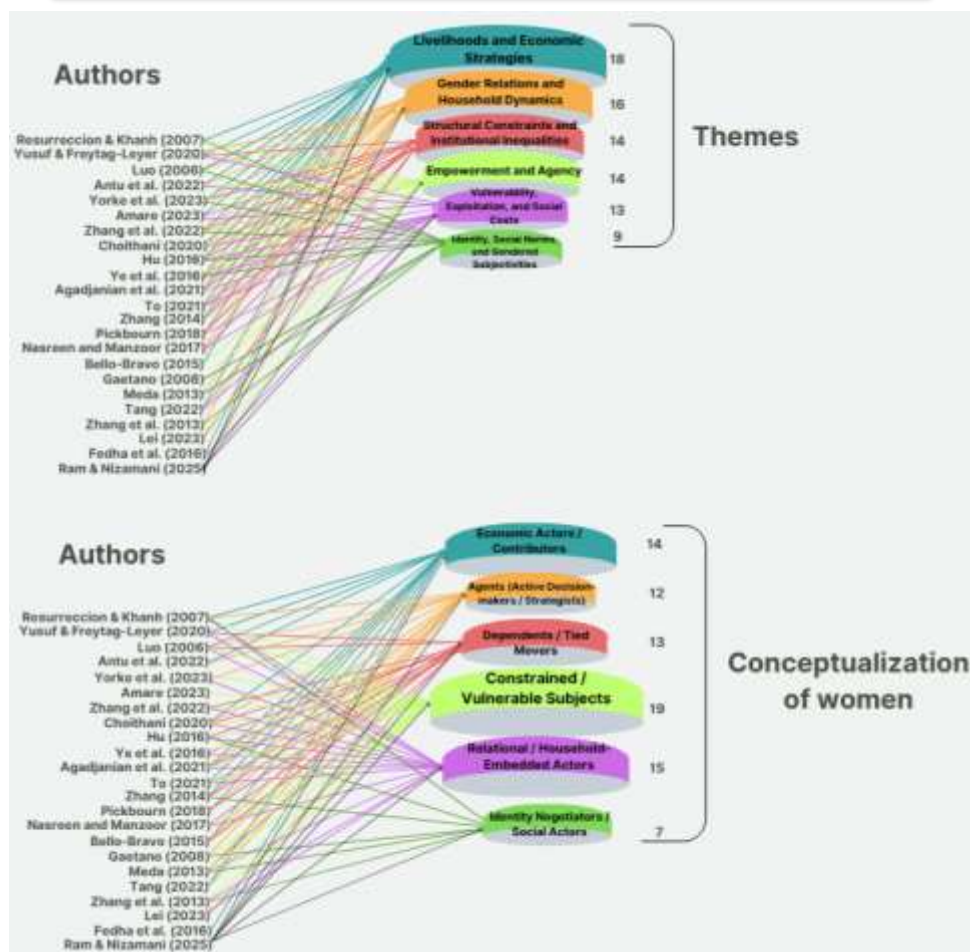


Fig. 3. Visual mapping of themes and conceptualizations.



**Table 2**  
**Characteristics of reviewed studies**

| Author/Year and Quality rating (QR)                         | Title                                                                                            | Country    | Data          | Dominant Thematic Area(s)                                     | Conceptualization of Women                                                          | Key Findings                                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Resurreccion & Van Khanh (2007) QR = medium quality (11/19) | Able to Come and Go: Reproducing Gender in Female Rural-Urban Migration in the Red River Delta   | Vietnam    | Mixed methods | Gendered migration, household strategies, gender reproduction | Women as economic actors who also reproduce and negotiate gendered household roles  | Rural women's migration sustains gendered household roles while enabling economic contributions and negotiation of agency                                            |
| Ram & Nizamani (2025) QR = medium quality (6/10)            | Women's Migration to Cities and Their Multifaceted Transformation                                | Pakistan   | Qualitative   | Empowerment, social transformation, economic freedom          | Active agents achieving financial autonomy and shedding norms                       | Migration fosters financial independence, decision-making, and resilience for educated rural women, aided by social networks despite initial adaptation challenges.  |
| Luo (2006) QR = high quality (7/9)                          | China's Rural-Urban Migration: Structure and Gender Attributes of the Floating Rural Labor Force | China      | Quantitative  | Gender migration patterns, institutional barriers             | Active participants vulnerable to institutions and family role constraints.         | Young, unmarried rural women migrants face institutional barriers, lower incomes, and family ties pulling married women back to rural areas.                         |
| Antu et al. (2022) QR = high quality (8/9)                  | Effect of Rural-Urban Migration on Age at Marriage Among Adolescent Girls in Bangladesh          | Bangladesh | Quantitative  | Child marriage, empowerment, public health                    | Active agents delaying marriage through economic participation.                     | Rural-urban migration delays child marriage among adolescent girls by 81%, enhancing empowerment through economic participation.                                     |
| Yorke et al. (2023) QR = high quality (9/10)                | Exploring the dynamics of Female Rural-Urban Migration for Secondary Education in Ethiopia       | Ethiopia   | Qualitative   | Girls' education, empowerment, structural barriers            | Active agents navigating structural inequalities for empowerment.                   | Secondary education drives rural girls' migration, yielding empowerment but exposing vulnerabilities in urban pathways.                                              |
| Amare (2023) QR = low quality (9/19)                        | Factors and Consequences of Rural-Urban Women Migration: Evidence from Injibara Town, Ethiopia   | Ethiopia   | Mixed methods | Push/pull factors, exploitation, housing risks                | Vulnerable group with migration agency but exposed to urban exploitation.           | Rural women migrate due to GBV, poverty, and land scarcity but face urban housing shortages, rights violations, harassment, and exploitation.                        |
| J. Zhang et al. (2022) QR = high quality (8/9)              | Gender Differences in Rural-Urban Migration and Impact on Depression in Later Life               | China      | Quantitative  | Migration, mental health, gender disparities                  | Gendered lens; family/marriage-driven migrants affected by Hukou and social rights. | Rural women show distinct migration patterns from men, with return migration increasing their depression risk and requiring gender-sensitive mental health policies. |
| Choithani (2020) QR = medium quality (13/19)                | Gendered Livelihoods: Migrating Men, Left-Behind Women                                           | India      | Mixed methods | Gender livelihoods, household                                 | Active agents reshaped by male migration; empowered yet burdened by inequality.     | Male out-migration gives left-behind rural women decision-making autonomy but increases                                                                              |



|                                                  |                                                                                                               |            |               |                                                               |                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                  | & Household Food Security in India                                                                            |            |               | dynamics, food security                                       |                                                                                         | workloads, limits empowerment, and harms food security due to low remittances.                                                                                                   |
| Hu (2016) QR = high quality (9/9)                | Impact of Rural-to-Urban Migration on Family and Gender Values in China                                       | China      | Quantitative  | Sociocultural change, family values, institutional effects    | Active agents whose gender/family attitudes shift with migration status and SES.        | Permanent rural-urban migrants (especially women) adopt liberal gender/family values unlike temporary migrants, driven by education, occupation, and reduced hukou barriers.     |
| Ye et al., (2016) QR = medium quality (7/10)     | Left-Behind Women: Gender Exclusion & Inequality in Rural-Urban Migration in China                            | China      | Qualitative   | Gender inequality, social exclusion, family dynamics          | Vulnerable left-behind members with heavy burdens and limited agency.                   | Left-behind rural women face heavy workloads, stress, exclusion, and limited agency during male migration, perpetuating patriarchy despite minor decision-making gains.          |
| Agadjanian et al. (2021) QR = high quality (8/9) | When Leaving Is Normal and Staying Is Novel: Men's Migration & Women's Employment in Rural Mozambique         | Mozambique | Quantitative  | Migration development, gender labor, household bargaining     | Migration development, gender labor, household bargaining                               | Men's prolonged rural-urban migration reduces women's non-subsistence employment in Mozambique, reinforcing traditional gender roles and household subsistence work.             |
| To (2021) QR = medium quality (7/10)             | Mother, Wife, or Worker: Life Course & Motivations of Remarried Mainland Chinese Immigrant Women in Hong Kong | Hong Kong  | Qualitative   | Gender migration, life course, institutional family roles     | Active agents embedded in family/institutional "linked lives" as mothers/wives/workers. | Remarried rural Chinese women in Hong Kong migrate variably for jobs/independence (older) or family/education (younger), prioritizing motherhood amid institutional constraints. |
| N. Zhang (2014) QR = medium quality (6/10)       | Performing Identities: Women in Rural-Urban Migration in Contemporary China                                   | China      | Qualitative   | Gender identity, structural constraints, identity performance | Active agents performing fluid urban identities amid structural constraints.            | Rural migrant women in China perform modern urban identities through appearance/language while rejecting peasant labels, though constrained by hukou stigma and family roles.    |
| Pickbourn (2018) QR = high quality (15/19)       | Rethinking Rural-Urban Migration & Women's Empowerment in the Era of SDGs: Lessons from Ghana                 | Ghana      | Mixed methods | Agency, empowerment, structural barriers, SDG 5               | Strategic active agents balancing migration necessity with empowerment challenges.      | Rural women in Ghana gain economic mobility and challenge gender norms through migration, but face housing insecurity and harassment limiting full empowerment.                  |



| Author/Year                                          | Title                                                                                                                   | Country  | Data          | Dominant Thematic Area(s)                                         | Conceptualization of Women                                                                                   | Key Findings                                                                                                                                                                               |
|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Nasreen & Manzoor (2017) QR = medium quality (10/19) | Rural Urban Migration and Women in Urban Slums of Karachi                                                               | Pakistan | Mixed methods | Migration dynamics, urban poverty, slum settlement                | Active participants driven by poverty within family migration units.                                         | Rural Pakistani women migrate from poverty to Karachi slums expecting improvement but encounter poor infrastructure, health risks, and stagnant incomes as domestic workers.               |
| Bello-Bravo (2015) QR = low quality (4/9)            | Rural-Urban Migration: A Path for Empowering Women Through Entrepreneurial Activities in West Africa                    | Nigeria  | Quantitative  | Migration empowerment, entrepreneurship, social impacts           | Active entrepreneurial agents empowered variably by social status.                                           | Migration expands entrepreneurial opportunities for rural Nigerian women, enhancing economic status and networks, though often family-driven and biased toward pre-existing businesswomen. |
| Gaetano (2008) QR = high quality (10/10)             | Sexuality in Diasporic Space: Rural-to-Urban Migrant Women Negotiating Gender & Marriage in Contemporary China          | China    | Qualitative   | Gender/sexuality, identity reconstruction, diasporic subjectivity | Active agents negotiating gender/sexual identities in diasporic transformation.                              | Rural Chinese migrant women in Beijing redefine gender/sexual identities and marriage choices through urban "makeovers," gaining autonomy despite persistent rural-urban inequalities.     |
| Meda (2013) QR = high quality (8.5/10)               | Single Mothers of Nairobi: Rural-Urban Migration & Transformation of Gender Roles & Family Relations in Kenya           | Kenya    | Qualitative   | Migration social change, family transformation, gender roles      | Resourceful yet vulnerable single mothers transforming gender roles.                                         | Rural-urban migration in Kenya transforms single mothers into household heads with shifting gender roles, but brings land insecurity, isolation, and new vulnerabilities.                  |
| Tang (2022) QR = high quality (8/9)                  | Effect of Left-Behind Women on Fertilizer Use: Evidence from China's Rural Households Engaging in Rural-Urban Migration | China    | Quantitative  | Gender migration, agricultural decision-making, sustainability    | Dual left-behind types—recognized (hukou heads) vs. unrecognized de facto decision-makers lacking resources. | Recognized left-behind rural women in China use 35% less fertilizer sustainably, while unrecognized de facto leaders overuse it due to lacking resources.                                  |
| C. Zhang et al. (2013) QR                            | Impact of Rural-Urban Migration on                                                                                      | China    | Mixed         | Gender relations, household                                       | Active agents gaining autonomy/rights through economic                                                       | Rural-urban migration in China boosts women's                                                                                                                                              |



|                                                            |                                                                                                  |                                         |              |                                                                                               |                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| = high quality (15/19)                                     | Gender Relations in Chinese Households                                                           |                                         |              | dynamics, labor division                                                                      | participation despite structural barriers.                                                       | labor participation and egalitarian household relations, though discrimination and burdens persist.                                                |
| Lei (2023) QR = high quality (8.5/10)                      | The Patriarchal Trap: Village Wives Left Behind Amid Chinese Rural–Urban Migration               | China                                   | Qualitative  | Gender inequality; family decision-making; vulnerabilities; patriarchal systems; gender norms | Passive, subordinate, vulnerable wives trapped by patriarchal migration dynamics.                | Male-controlled migration traps Chinese left-behind wives in patriarchal subordination, increasing their care burdens without empowerment.         |
| Fedha et al. (2016) QR = low quality (4/9)                 | Implication of Men's Rural–Urban Migration on Household Decision-Making in Soy Sub-County, Kenya | Kenya                                   | Quantitative | Gender roles & decision-making; HH dynamics; education; agriculture; health access            | Primary caregivers assuming male roles with increased responsibility under cultural constraints. | Men's rural-urban migration in Kenya forces women into household decision-making but harms children's education, health access, and food security. |
| Yusuf & Freytag-Leyer (2020) QR = medium quality (12.5/19) | Causes & Effects: Female Street Food Vendors in Indonesia & Thailand                             | Indonesia (Tangerang)Thailand (Hat Yai) | Mixed        | Feminization of migration; economic drivers; remittances; rural productivity                  | Active economic agents with city-varying autonomy tied to family networks.                       | Rural women vendors migrate to Indonesian/Thai cities primarily for economic gains, with varying autonomy by distance and family influence.        |

**Study quality**

Quality was assessed using JBI Critical Appraisal Checklists based on each study's design. Qualitative studies (n=8) were appraised using the JBI 10-item checklist for Qualitative Research (Lockwood et al., 2015). Quantitative studies (n=8) were appraised using the JBI Checklist for Studies Reporting Prevalence Data (Munn et al., 2020). For mixed-methods studies (n=7), both checklists were applied, as JBI does not currently have a dedicated mixed-methods tool. Each criterion was rated 'yes,' 'no,' 'unclear,' or 'not applicable.' A score of 1 was assigned for each 'yes' response, 0 otherwise. Quality was classified as high (qualitative: 8–10; quantitative: 7–9; mixed-methods: 15–19), medium (qualitative: 5–7; quantitative: 5–6; mixed-methods: 10–14), or low (qualitative: ≤4; quantitative: ≤4; mixed-methods: ≤9). Quality ratings are reported in Table 2. All studies were included regardless of rating.

**3.1 Thematic Focus in Rural Women's Rural–Urban Migration Research**

A systematic analysis of the 23 included studies reveals a patterned yet uneven distribution of thematic focus within rural women's rural–urban migration research. Rather than reflecting a balanced or evenly distributed body of scholarship, the literature clusters around a limited number of dominant thematic areas, indicating a concentration of analytical attention in specific domains.

**3.1.1 Livelihoods and Economic Strategies**

The most dominant thematic focus across the reviewed literature is the role of migration as a livelihood strategy and a mechanism for economic advancement. A total of 18 out of the 23 studies foreground economic motivations, income generation, and survival strategies as central to rural women's migration experiences (Agadjanian et al., 2021; Amare, 2023; Antu et al., 2022; Bello-Bravo, 2015; Choithani, 2020; Fedha et al., 2016; Hu, 2016; Luo, 2006; Pickbourn, 2018; Ram & Nizamani, 2025; Resurreccion & Van Khanh, 2007; Tang, 2022; To, 2021; Ye et al., 2016; Yorke et al., 2023; Yusuf & Freytag-Leyer, 2020; J. Zhang et al., 2022; N. Zhang, 2014).

Across these studies, migration is predominantly framed as a response to economic deprivation in rural areas and as a pathway to improved livelihoods through wage labour, entrepreneurship, and informal sector participation. For example, Yusuf & Freytag-Leyer (2020) examine women's migration through the economic logic of street food vending, emphasizing employment, remittances,



and household support, while Bello-Bravo (2015) presents migration as a route to entrepreneurial opportunity and income improvement among women in Ibadan. Antu et al. (2022) similarly link migration to improved economic opportunities for adolescent girls, particularly through labour participation that contributes to delayed marriage, and Amare (2023) explicitly identifies poverty, low productivity, land scarcity, and the search for employment and income as major migration drivers. Even in studies not centrally framed around entrepreneurship, such as Resurreccion & Van Khanh (2007), women's migration is still tied to household survival through urban informal work. Collectively, these studies show that the literature most often understands rural women's migration through an instrumental economic lens, where mobility is primarily interpreted as a strategy for livelihood improvement and economic survival.

### 3.1.2 Gender Relations and Household Dynamics

A second major thematic cluster centres on gender relations and household dynamics, with 16 of the 23 studies examining how migration interacts with intra-household roles, responsibilities, and power structures (Agadjanian et al., 2021; Antu et al., 2022; Choithani, 2020; Hu, 2016; Luo, 2006; Meda, 2013; Nasreen & Manzoor, 2017; Pickbourn, 2018; Ram & Nizamani, 2025; Resurreccion & Van Khanh, 2007; To, 2021; Ye et al., 2016; Yorke et al., 2023; C. Zhang et al., 2013; J. Zhang et al., 2022; N. Zhang, 2014).

Within this thematic area, migration is analyzed as a process embedded within household systems, where gendered divisions of labour, caregiving responsibilities, and decision-making structures are reworked. Resurreccion & Van Khanh (2007), for instance, examine how female migration in Vietnam reshapes domestic arrangements without necessarily transforming entrenched gender norms, while Choithani (2020) shows that male migration in India expands women's productive and reproductive burdens, producing a double load rather than uncomplicated empowerment. Ye et al. (2016) and Lei (2023) similarly foreground left-behind women's increased farm work, childcare, and emotional strain in rural China, and C. Zhang et al. (2013) focus directly on changes in household decision-making and gender division of labour in migrant households. Meda (2013) extends this household focus by showing how migration alters family relations and contributes to new household formations such as single motherhood. Together, these studies indicate that the literature frequently treats migration as a household-restructuring process, but one that often reconfigures rather than fundamentally overturns gendered family relations.

### 3.1.3 Empowerment and Agency

The theme of empowerment and agency appears in 14 of the 23 studies (Antu et al., 2022; Bello-Bravo, 2015; Choithani, 2020; Fedha et al., 2016; Gaetano, 2008; Hu, 2016; Lei, 2023; Ram & Nizamani, 2025; Resurreccion & Van Khanh, 2007; Tang, 2022; Ye et al., 2016; Yorke et al., 2023; Yusuf & Freytag-Leyer, 2020; J. Zhang et al., 2022).

The empowerment theme appears where migration is presented as creating new room for autonomy, educational advancement, income generation, or self-directed life choices. Yorke et al. (2023) provide one of the clearest examples, showing how migration for secondary education enables girls in Ethiopia to escape rural constraints such as early marriage and limited schooling. Pickbourn (2018) similarly frames migration in Ghana as a potential route to women's empowerment when it expands economic options and challenges restrictive gender norms. Bello-Bravo (2015) emphasizes women's perceptions of improved economic and social standing through entrepreneurial activity, while Gaetano (2008) presents migration as enabling rural Chinese women to actively remake gender identity and assert agency in relation to courtship, marriage, and self-presentation. At the same time, studies such as Choithani (2020) and Tang (2022) complicate this theme by showing that increased responsibility or decision-making does not always produce improved welfare or broad-based empowerment. This indicates that empowerment in the literature is usually not treated as an automatic outcome of migration, but as a conditional and uneven process shaped by surrounding social and structural contexts.

### 3.1.4 Structural Constraints and Institutional Inequalities

Structural and institutional constraints emerge as a significant thematic focus in 14 of the 23 studies (Agadjanian et al., 2021; Amare, 2023; Choithani, 2020; Hu, 2016; Lei, 2023; Nasreen & Manzoor, 2017; Pickbourn, 2018; Tang, 2022; To, 2021; Ye et al., 2016; Yorke et al., 2023; Yusuf & Freytag-Leyer, 2020; J. Zhang et al., 2022; N. Zhang, 2014).

Structural and institutional barriers are repeatedly invoked to explain both why women migrate and why migration outcomes remain uneven. Luo (2006) highlights how women's labour market participation is constrained by family obligations and lack of social security, while Hu (2016) and J. Zhang et al. (2022) emphasize the continued significance of hukou and other institutional mechanisms in shaping migration experiences and outcomes in China. Yorke et al. (2023) show that girls' migration for education in Ethiopia is rooted in unequal access to schooling and wider rural-urban inequalities, and Amare (2023) points to land scarcity, low agricultural productivity, and gender-based violence as structurally embedded migration drivers. Nasreen & Manzoor (2017) further underscore how poor urban infrastructure and inadequate services intensify the precariousness of women's migration in slum settings. These studies show that migration is not merely an individual choice or household strategy; rather, it is deeply conditioned by institutional exclusions, uneven development, and structural disadvantage.



### 3.1.5 Identity, Social Norms, and Gendered Subjectivities

Identity-related themes appear in 9 of the 23 studies (Gaetano, 2008; Hu, 2016; Luo, 2006; Meda, 2013; Resurreccion & Van Khanh, 2007; Ye et al., 2016; Yorke et al., 2023; C. Zhang et al., 2013; J. Zhang et al., 2022).

Although less dominant than economic and household themes, a distinct strand of the literature examines migration as a site of identity negotiation, value change, and the remaking of gendered subjectivities. Gaetano (2008) is especially explicit in this regard, showing how rural migrant women in China negotiate sexuality, marriage, and urban femininity in ways that unsettle traditional rural identities. N. Zhang (2014) likewise centres identity construction and performance, arguing that migration allows women to negotiate selfhood, modernity, and belonging across rural and urban spaces. Hu (2016) broadens this by examining how migration affects family and gender values, while Resurreccion & Van Khanh (2007) connect migration to the negotiation of gender identity within households. Meda (2013) also points to migration-induced shifts in family roles and social organization. What these studies share is an interest in migration not only as movement for work or survival, but as a process through which women confront, reproduce, and sometimes reshape prevailing gender norms and social expectations. Even so, this remains a comparatively thinner thematic strand, suggesting that the subjective and symbolic dimensions of migration receive less sustained attention than economic and household concerns.

### 3.1.6 Vulnerability, Exploitation, and Social Costs

The theme of vulnerability appears in 13 of the 23 studies (Agadjanian et al., 2021; Amare, 2023; Antu et al., 2022; Choithani, 2020; Fedha et al., 2016; Hu, 2016; Nasreen & Manzoor, 2017; Pickbourn, 2018; Ram & Nizamani, 2025; Tang, 2022; To, 2021; Ye et al., 2016; Yusuf & Freytag-Leyer, 2020).

A substantial body of the reviewed literature also frames rural women's migration through risk, precarity, and social cost. Amare (2023) foregrounds exploitation, housing insecurity, food shortages, harassment, illness, and rights violations among women migrants in Ethiopia, while Nasreen & Manzoor (2017) emphasize the deteriorating living conditions, health problems, and infrastructural deficits affecting migrant women in Karachi's informal settlements. Ye et al. (2016) show how left-behind women in China bear emotional stress, social exclusion, and intensified family burdens, and Lei (2023) argues that migration can reinforce women's dependency, marital dissatisfaction, and emotional vulnerability rather than empowerment. Choithani (2020) similarly identifies worsening food security outcomes despite women's increased responsibilities in migrant households. These studies collectively demonstrate that migration is often associated not only with opportunity but also with heightened precarity, particularly where gendered disadvantage intersects with weak social protection, unstable labour conditions, and patriarchal control.

These studies highlight the risks associated with migration, including labour exploitation, gender-based violence, poor working conditions, and social marginalization. Migration is thus characterized by a duality of opportunity and precarity, where economic gains are often accompanied by significant social costs.

## 3.2 Conceptualization of Rural Women in Rural–Urban Migration

A systematic analysis of the 23 included studies reveals that rural women are conceptualized through a diverse yet patterned set of representations within rural–urban migration research. Rather than reflecting a singular or unified understanding, the literature constructs rural women through multiple, and at times overlapping, conceptual lenses that capture different dimensions of their migration experiences. Across the studies, six primary conceptualizations emerge: (1) rural women as economic actors and contributors, (2) rural women as dependents or tied movers, (3) rural women as constrained or vulnerable subjects, (4) rural women as empowered agents, (5) rural women as relational or household-embedded actors, and (6) rural women as identity negotiators.

### 3.2.1 Rural Women as Economic Actors and Contributors

A prominent conceptualization within the literature positions rural women as economic actors and contributors, actively engaging in migration as a strategy for income generation and livelihood improvement. A total of 14 out of the 23 studies frame rural women primarily in terms of their participation in economic activities, highlighting their roles as wage earners, entrepreneurs, and contributors to household survival (Agadjanian et al., 2021; Antu et al., 2022; Bello-Bravo, 2015; Choithani, 2020; Fedha et al., 2016; Luo, 2006; Pickbourn, 2018; Ram & Nizamani, 2025; Resurreccion & Van Khanh, 2007; Tang, 2022; To, 2021; Yusuf & Freytag-Leyer, 2020; C. Zhang et al., 2013; N. Zhang, 2014).

Across these studies, rural women's migration is closely tied to economic necessity and opportunity. For example, Yusuf & Freytag-Leyer (2020) illustrate how women engage in street food vending as a livelihood strategy that supports both individual survival and household income, while Bello-Bravo (2015) highlights women's participation in small-scale entrepreneurship in urban contexts. Similarly, Antu et al. (2022) link migration to labour participation that reshapes life trajectories such as delayed marriage, and Pickbourn (2018) demonstrates how migration enables women to diversify income sources despite constrained conditions. Even in contexts where migration is not framed explicitly as entrepreneurial, such as Resurreccion & Van Khanh (2007), women's economic contribution remains central through engagement in informal labour (Ram & Nizamani, 2025). Collectively, these studies construct rural women as economically active subjects, though this framing often emphasizes their functional contribution to livelihoods rather than their broader social or political positioning.



### 3.2.2 Rural Women as Dependents or Tied Movers

A substantial portion of the literature conceptualizes rural women as dependents or tied movers, whose migration is shaped by household dynamics and male mobility. A total of 13 out of the 23 studies portray women's migration as relationally embedded within family systems, often linked to male migration, household survival strategies, or caregiving responsibilities (Agadjanian et al., 2021; Bello-Bravo, 2015; Choithani, 2020; Hu, 2016; Lei, 2023; Luo, 2006; Meda, 2013; Nasreen & Manzoor, 2017; To, 2021; Ye et al., 2016; Yusuf & Freytag-Leyer, 2020; J. Zhang et al., 2022).

For instance, Resurreccion & Van Khanh (2007) show how women's migration decisions are often embedded within household obligations, particularly caregiving roles, while Ye et al. (2016) and Hu (2016) highlight how women's lives are structured around family responsibilities, whether as migrants or as left-behind household members. Similarly, Ram & Nizamani (2025) and Meda (2013) demonstrates how migration decisions are frequently family-driven rather than individually motivated, and Agadjanian et al. (2021) reveal how women's roles are shaped by male migration patterns. This conceptualization positions rural women as relationally dependent actors, whose mobility is not entirely autonomous but shaped by familial expectations and gendered divisions of labour, thereby reinforcing the persistence of patriarchal structures within migration processes.

### 3.2.3 Rural Women as Constrained or Vulnerable Subjects

The most dominant conceptualization across the literature frames rural women as constrained or vulnerable subjects, appearing in 19 out of the 23 studies. These studies emphasize the structural, social, and gendered constraints that shape women's migration experiences, highlighting their exposure to risk, marginalisation, and limited agency (Agadjanian et al., 2021; Amare, 2023; Bello-Bravo, 2015; Choithani, 2020; Gaetano, 2008; Hu, 2016; Lei, 2023; Luo, 2006; Meda, 2013; Nasreen & Manzoor, 2017; Ram & Nizamani, 2025; Resurreccion & Van Khanh, 2007; Tang, 2022; To, 2021; Ye et al., 2016; Yorke et al., 2023; Yusuf & Freytag-Leyer, 2020; C. Zhang et al., 2013; J. Zhang et al., 2022).

Across these studies, rural women are frequently portrayed as navigating precarious conditions shaped by structural inequality and gendered power relations. For example, Amare (2023) documents how women migrants face exploitation, housing insecurity, and poor working conditions, while Nasreen & Manzoor (2017) highlight the infrastructural and health-related challenges confronting migrant women in informal settlements. Similarly, Choithani (2020) shows how increased responsibilities do not necessarily translate into improved well-being, and Ye et al. (2016) and Lei (2023) emphasize emotional stress and social vulnerability among left-behind women. These findings collectively construct rural women as structurally constrained actors, whose migration experiences are shaped by systemic inequalities that limit their opportunities and expose them to multiple forms of risk.

### 3.2.4 Rural Women as Empowered Agents

In contrast to vulnerability-focused representations, 12 out of the 23 studies conceptualize rural women as empowered agents, capable of making strategic decisions and exercising agency within migration processes (Agadjanian et al., 2021; Antu et al., 2022; Bello-Bravo, 2015; Choithani, 2020; Gaetano, 2008; Luo, 2006; Pickbourn, 2018; Ram & Nizamani, 2025; Resurreccion & Van Khanh, 2007; Tang, 2022; Yorke et al., 2023; N. Zhang, 2014).

These studies highlight women's capacity to actively shape their migration trajectories in pursuit of improved economic, social, and personal outcomes. For instance, Yorke et al. (2023) show how girls migrate to access education and avoid early marriage, while Bello-Bravo (2015) illustrates how women leverage migration to achieve economic independence through entrepreneurship. Similarly, Gaetano (2008) and N. Zhang (2014) demonstrate how migration enables women to renegotiate gender roles and assert autonomy in areas such as marriage and identity. However, this agency is often exercised within constraining environments, indicating that empowerment is not absolute but situated within structural and cultural limits. As such, the literature presents a nuanced view of rural women as situated agents, capable of exercising choice while remaining embedded within systems of constraint.

### 3.2.5 Rural Women as Relational or Household-Embedded Actors

A total of 15 out of the 23 studies conceptualize rural women as relational or household-embedded actors, whose migration is deeply intertwined with family structures, social roles, and collective survival strategies (Agadjanian et al., 2021; Choithani, 2020; Hu, 2016; Lei, 2023; Luo, 2006; Meda, 2013; Nasreen & Manzoor, 2017; Ram & Nizamani, 2025; Resurreccion & Van Khanh, 2007; To, 2021; Ye et al., 2016; Yorke et al., 2023; Yusuf & Freytag-Leyer, 2020; C. Zhang et al., 2013; J. Zhang et al., 2022).

Within this framing, migration is understood not as an individual act but as part of broader household strategies. For example, Choithani (2020) and Ye et al. (2016) show how women's roles expand within households as part of migration processes, while C. Zhang et al. (2013) highlight how decision-making remains embedded within family structures. Similarly, Yorke et al. (2023) and J. Zhang et al. (2022) demonstrate how migration decisions are shaped by family expectations and obligations. This conceptualization reinforces the idea that rural women's migration is collectively negotiated and socially embedded, reflecting the centrality of family and kinship systems in shaping migration experiences.



### 3.2.6 Rural Women as Identity Negotiators

A smaller but analytically significant group of studies conceptualizes rural women as identity negotiators, focusing on the transformative and subjective dimensions of migration. A total of 7 out of the 23 studies adopt this perspective (Gaetano, 2008; Hu, 2016; Meda, 2013; Ram & Nizamani, 2025; Resurreccion & Van Khanh, 2007; C. Zhang et al., 2013; N. Zhang, 2014).

These studies examine how migration enables women to renegotiate gender identities, social roles, and cultural expectations. For example, Gaetano (2008) explores how migration facilitates shifts in femininity and social identity among rural women in China, while Zhang (2014) highlights how women use migration to assert independence and redefine their social positioning. Similarly, Meda (2013) and Hu (2016) demonstrate how migration reshapes women's roles within family and community contexts. Despite its importance, this conceptualization remains less prominent within the literature, suggesting that the subjective and identity-related dimensions of migration are comparatively underexplored.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Thematic Concentrations and Neglect in the Literature on Rural Women's Migration

The thematic patterns identified across the reviewed studies reveal a field that is both analytically rich and unevenly structured, with rural women's rural-urban migration predominantly interpreted through a limited set of dominant analytical lenses. At a broad level, the literature is strongly oriented towards instrumental and relational frameworks, where migration is primarily understood as a response to material deprivation and a strategy for livelihood improvement. This emphasis on economic motivations—particularly income generation, survival strategies, and labour participation (e.g., Amare, 2023; Antu et al., 2022; Resurreccion & Van Khanh, 2007; Yusuf & Freytag-Leyer, 2020)—positions migration as a functional mechanism for economic advancement, thereby privileging economic rationality as the central explanatory logic within the field. Closely intertwined with this is a relational framing centred on gender relations and household dynamics, where women's migration is rarely conceptualized as an individualized process but rather as one embedded within family structures, caregiving responsibilities, and intra-household power relations (Agadjanian et al., 2021; Choithani, 2020; Ye et al., 2016).

The co-occurrence of economic and household themes suggests that the literature frequently adopts an integrated economic-household perspective, in which migration is simultaneously framed as a livelihood strategy and a household-level adjustment mechanism. While this provides important insights into the interconnectedness of economic and familial processes, it also contributes to a narrowing of analytical scope, as other dimensions of migration receive comparatively less sustained attention. This is particularly evident in the treatment of empowerment and agency, which, although widely acknowledged, is rarely conceptualized as an independent analytical dimension. Instead, agency is often embedded within economic participation or educational access (Bello-Bravo, 2015; Gaetano, 2008; Yorke et al., 2023), resulting in a conditional and context-dependent understanding of empowerment that remains analytically constrained.

A similar pattern is observed in the treatment of structural and institutional factors. While many studies recognize the role of broader conditions such as rural-urban inequalities, labour market segmentation, and policy constraints (Hu, 2016; Pickbourn, 2018; J. Zhang et al., 2022), these factors are often positioned as contextual backdrops rather than central analytical drivers. Consequently, the literature acknowledges structural influences without consistently integrating them into its core explanatory frameworks, thereby limiting deeper engagement with systemic inequality. In contrast, themes relating to identity, social norms, and gendered subjectivities remain comparatively marginal, with fewer studies explicitly examining how migration reshapes women's identities, aspirations, and social positioning (Gaetano, 2008; N. Zhang, 2014). This relative neglect suggests that the subjective and symbolic dimensions of migration remain underdeveloped, despite their importance in understanding migration as a transformative process.

At the same time, the literature does not present migration as uniformly beneficial. The recurring emphasis on vulnerability, exploitation, and social costs highlights the precarious nature of migration for many rural women, particularly in relation to labour conditions, social marginalization, and emotional strain (Amare, 2023; Nasreen & Manzoor, 2017; Tang, 2022). However, similar to structural factors, vulnerability is often analysed alongside economic outcomes rather than as a central organizing theme, resulting in a fragmented treatment of migration's negative consequences. Taken together, these patterns point to a clear thematic bias within the literature, where economic and household-related analyses dominate, while identity-based, structural, and integrative perspectives remain comparatively underdeveloped.

This imbalance has important implications for knowledge production within the field. By privileging instrumental and relational interpretations of migration, the literature risks generating a partial and fragmented understanding of rural women's experiences, where key dimensions such as identity, power, and structural inequality are insufficiently explored. Furthermore, the uneven integration of themes indicates that the literature does not consistently engage with the interconnected nature of migration processes. While certain dimensions—particularly economic and household factors—are frequently analyzed together, others remain analytically isolated, limiting the development of a coherent and holistic framework.

Overall, the thematic structure of the literature suggests that rural women's migration is most commonly understood as a multi-layered yet unevenly analyzed phenomenon, where economic necessity, household relations, and conditional empowerment intersect within structurally constrained environments. However, the limited integration of identity, structural, and vulnerability perspectives indicates that the field has not yet fully captured the complexity of these intersecting dimensions. This underscores the need for more balanced and integrative analytical approaches that move beyond dominant thematic concentrations to engage more



explicitly with how economic, social, structural, and identity-based processes interact in shaping rural women's migration experiences.

#### **4.2. Conceptualizing Rural Women: Between Vulnerability, Agency, and Relational Embeddedness**

The analysis of how rural women are conceptualized across the reviewed studies reveals a field characterized by multiplicity, tension, and uneven analytical emphasis, where diverse representations coexist but are not equally distributed or systematically integrated. Across the literature, rural women are most frequently constructed as constrained or vulnerable subjects, appearing in the majority of studies and reflecting a strong analytical focus on structural inequality, gendered power relations, and socio-economic disadvantage. Migration is thus often framed within contexts of poverty, limited access to resources, labour market exclusion, and exposure to exploitation, positioning women's mobility as shaped primarily by constraint rather than choice (Amare, 2023; Choithani, 2020; Nasreen & Manzoor, 2017). This dominant framing establishes vulnerability as the central conceptual lens through which rural women's migration is understood.

However, this representation does not exist in isolation. A substantial body of studies simultaneously conceptualizes rural women as agents, capable of making strategic decisions, pursuing opportunities, and negotiating their migration trajectories (Gaetano, 2008; Resurreccion & Van Khanh, 2007; Yorke et al., 2023; N. Zhang, 2014). Importantly, this agentic framing does not replace the vulnerability perspective but coexists with it, revealing a fundamental tension within the literature. Rather than presenting agency and constraint as mutually exclusive, the findings suggest that rural women are more accurately understood as situated agents, exercising agency within the limits imposed by structural and socio-cultural conditions. Migration, in this sense, becomes a site where agency is enacted, but always within contexts shaped by inequality, institutional constraints, and gender norms.

This duality is further reinforced by the conceptualization of rural women as economic actors, where migration is associated with active engagement in livelihood strategies and income generation (Bello-Bravo, 2015; Pickbourn, 2018; Yusuf & Freytag-Leyer, 2020). While this framing highlights women's economic participation and contribution, it does not necessarily translate into full autonomy or empowerment. Instead, economic agency is often embedded within broader systems of constraint, suggesting that women's roles as economic contributors remain shaped by structural limitations and unequal access to opportunities. Similarly, the conceptualization of rural women as dependents or tied movers, and as relational or household-embedded actors, underscores the extent to which migration is situated within family systems, caregiving responsibilities, and collective survival strategies (Agadjanian et al., 2021; Meda, 2013; Ye et al., 2016). In these representations, migration is rarely framed as an entirely individual decision but as one negotiated within household dynamics and gendered divisions of labour.

While this relational framing provides important insights into the social context of migration, it also raises critical questions about the extent to which women's autonomy is recognized within the literature. By positioning women primarily in relation to household roles and family obligations, these studies risk reinforcing traditional gender norms that define women's mobility in terms of relational dependency rather than independent agency. As such, the literature simultaneously acknowledges women's participation in migration while situating it within gendered relational structures that may constrain their autonomy.

In contrast to these dominant representations, the conceptualization of rural women as identity negotiators remains comparatively underdeveloped, appearing in only a limited number of studies (Gaetano, 2008; N. Zhang, 2014). These studies highlight migration as a process through which women renegotiate gender norms, reshape identities, and redefine their social positioning. However, the relatively limited attention given to identity-based analyses suggests that the subjective and symbolic dimensions of migration remain marginal within the literature, despite their importance in understanding migration as a transformative experience. Consequently, while migration is acknowledged as a process of change, the ways in which it reshapes women's self-perception, aspirations, and lived experiences are not fully explored.

These patterns reveal a literature characterized by conceptual tension and fragmentation, where multiple representations coexist but are not consistently integrated into a coherent analytical framework. Studies focusing on vulnerability often foreground structural constraints without fully engaging with women's agency, while those emphasizing empowerment may underplay the structural conditions that shape women's choices. Similarly, relational perspectives highlight household dynamics but may overlook identity transformation and individual subjectivity. This results in a fragmented understanding of rural women's migration, where different dimensions are examined in isolation rather than as interconnected processes.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

This study set out to provide a systematic and analytically grounded account of how rural women are represented in the literature on rural-urban migration. Through an integrative synthesis of 23 empirical studies, the analysis moved beyond mere aggregation of findings to examine two core dimensions: the dominant thematic focus and the conceptualization of rural women. Collectively, the findings depict a field that is analytically rich yet structurally uneven, marked by patterned emphases, conceptual tensions, and incomplete integration.

At the thematic level, the literature is heavily concentrated around economic and household-related analyses, with livelihoods, gender relations, and structural constraints emerging as predominant areas of inquiry. While these themes yield important insights into the material and relational conditions shaping migration, they also reflect a narrowing of analytical scope—dimensions such as



identity and subjective experience remain comparatively underexplored. This uneven distribution suggests that the literature privileges instrumental and relational interpretations of migration, often at the expense of more holistic and integrative perspectives.

With regard to conceptualization, rural women are represented through multiple, and at times overlapping, lenses—most prominently as vulnerable subjects, economic actors, household-embedded individuals, and agents. Yet these representations are not evenly distributed; vulnerability constitutes the dominant conceptual frame. Crucially, the coexistence of vulnerability and agency reveals a fundamental conceptual tension: rural women are neither purely passive nor fully autonomous, but are better understood as situated agents operating within structurally constrained environments. Despite this complexity, the literature rarely integrates these conceptualizations into a coherent framework, resulting in a fragmented understanding of women's migration experiences.

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